

Greek Pottery Painting

Some of the greatest expressions of ancient Greek artistry which survived into our own century are the pottery and vase paintings. These magnificent vases, bowls, wine cups, and other objects are scattered throughout the world's museums and private collections, bestowing upon the viewer both aesthetic pleasure and a glimpse into upper-class Greek life.

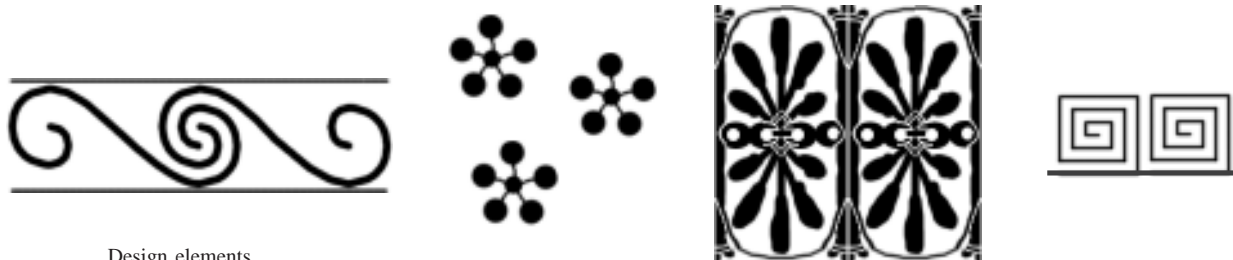
In a majority of vases, the painters created scenes showing athletic contests, funeral processions, celebrations, or battles, as well as mythological characters. Viewing these works of art, we see the tools and weapons, fashions and hairstyles and objects familiar to that ancient culture and gain new understanding of Classical Greece. The vases show, for example, that in ancient games, long jumpers increased momentum for jumps by swinging weights during take-off. We also see that space limitations and the complexity and sophistication of the designs on the vases led to the wide use of symbols to relay information and denote meaning. For example, each deity had a symbol that could be used in place of the god on the vase. The lightning symbol could be used in place of the figure Zeus, or the owl could be used for Athena.

Each vase required the craftsmanship of both potter and painter, so that the finished product was usually a team effort. Like Greek architecture, vase-painting styles varied from region to region and became more complex and sophisticated as techniques improved. For example, the Mycenaean preferred intricate geometric patterns. Even depictions of humans and animals took on a geometric ("match stick") appearance in the hands of the Mycenaean artisans.

The most famous regional styles were the Athens' Red-figure and Black-figure vases of the fifth century. Potters used identical clay for each vase and the color (red on black or black on red) was determined by changes in the firing of the kiln. The artists also considered the use and occasion for each vase or cup in determining the scene to be painted. Would the object be used for celebration or a religious ceremony? Would it record victory in battle or honor a particular athlete or athletic event? Consider, for example, how a modern-day vase painter might depict events surrounding American gymnast Kerri Strug who secured a gold medal for the American women's team during the 1996 Olympics by taking one final vault despite a severely sprained ankle. The determination of subject matter, color, size, and purpose of the object inspired artistic teamwork by the potter and painter and resulted in masterpieces.



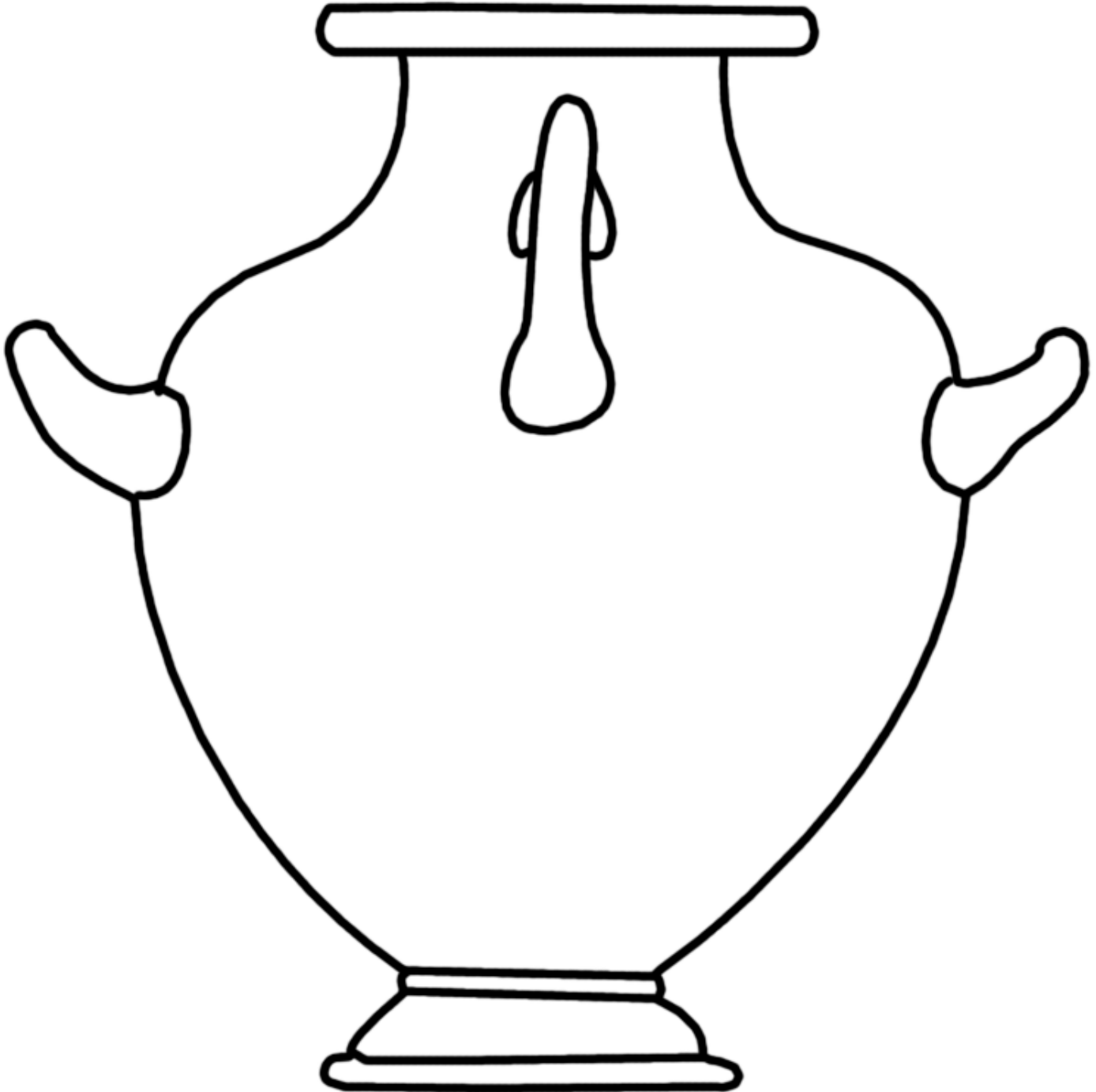
PSAIX. Black-figured amphora: *Herakles strangling the Nemean lion*.



Design elements



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This Greek vase shape, called a *hydria*, was commonly used for water. It is urn shaped and has three handles, a pair for carrying and a third for pouring. Decorate this vase with your own design using the design elements shown on the previous page. You can use them alone or repeat them to form a border or line.

